

Sister Ann

By Alice Brown

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THE two Brownlow sisters came up the path at dusk, and Linda, scuttling ahead, fitted the key into their door. She did it hastily, with futile scratchings, for the matter of the key promised a mild contention between them sure to be begun upon if Ann were delayed in entering. As the lock yielded, Ann also reached the sill. She threw back her bonnet-strings and took a farewell glance at the summer twilight sifting down.

"My soul!" said she, "anybody'd think you'd been carried off every day o' your life for fifty year. Who do you s'pose wants two old maids jest let out o' prayer-meetin'?"

They walked into the house according to an established order, Ann in advance. She struck a match at the kitchen stove, and began lighting the lamp, taking pleasure meantime in its brilliant cleanliness and the bit of red flannel floating in the oil. But Linda stood motionless, her bonnet dangling from one hand.

"Ann," she whispered, piercingly, "I b'lieve I hear suthin'. Do be still a minute, an' le's see."

Ann swept relentlessly past her, and set the lamp on the table. Then she took off her own bonnet, and examined it with a loving solicitude. It was a gay creation loaded with flowers from many harvestings in drawer and bandbox. She was a slight,

short woman, with gleaming eyes and a wide, satirical mouth. Her face, through laughter and the habit of mirthful comment, had fallen into lines distinctly humorous. "On'y you look at this bun-nit," said she, her dry voice moved to laughter. "Ain't it been through the wars? I b'lieve I'll put on them old roses to-morrow, the ones mother wore so many year."

Linda still stood listening. In this near contrast they were an amazing pair. Ann was covered with rags and tags of finery. A sprigged muslin fell about her in scanty folds, and a scarlet bow and large cameo pin emphasized the meeting of her embroidered collar. Ann was the slave of dress, and she stood there and almost fondled her bonnet. She loved youth, and even her coarse hair had refused to turn gray. She loved happiness, and found it everywhere, little parings of it even, and heaped them together to make a pile, as she did with the scraps that formed her bonnet. Linda, much her junior, looked like a decent little old lady, with her smooth white braids and black dress. Her face was delicate in its thin transparency, and at this moment its deprecating look had deepened into fright. She put one hand upon her sister's arm and held it there.

"Oh, Ann!" she breathed, "I'm 'most sure somebody's in this house. I kinder feel so,"

Ann tossed her bonnet on the table and sat down in the old-fashioned chair by the window.

"Law, no, there ain't," said she, comfortably, with the tolerant kindness responsive to a long-familiar plaint; "you locked the door yourself." Then she fell into rocking, and struck up rather stridently:

"Fly like a youthful hart or roe!"

They had sung it at prayer-meeting that evening, and the abandon of it moved her blood. The invocation to "hills where spices grow" meant other lands and other people—countries, perhaps, where the monkeys lived and hand-organs were no passing dream.

Linda tiptoed out into the shed, and came back quivering.

"It's jest as I thought," she whispered, a pathetic hand over her heart. "You left open that shed winder after I'd locked the door an' all!"

"Why, yes," said Ann, cheerfully, pausing between slurs; "I guess the cat's got to git in. You will keep the kittens there in the shed."

Linda gave a little moan, and Ann, recalled from more robust imaginings, turned upon her an apprehending glance.

"The land alive!" said she, with kindly energy; "if you ain't the beater! You've 'most worked yourself up into a fever. Lindy, you stop your twittlerin' an' set down in that chair an' act like a Christian woman."

Linda obeyed, partly because her knees failed under her, but chiefly in deference to her sister's will. But though she sank into a chair, she sat gingerly, as she had often done in a carriage when the horse was "high." She seemed to be perching like a frail and uncertain butterfly, ready for flight. Ann began a cheerful cannonade of talk to reassure her. That was a habit of hers, an ill-considered one, as Linda might have told her; for nerves are seldom stilled by much philosophy.

"You never heard what I said to Becca's mother when I was walkin' home with her?" she asked, rocking happily. "You was so took up with the minister. Wa'n't he carryin' your hymn-book? Budge as you please. Well, Mis' Waterman she says, 'It's awful queer, ain't it, your aunt Mary left that clock to Lindy, when she'd prom-

ised it to Solon over 'n' over again?' 'I guess that's the reason,' says I. 'He wore her all out thornin' her.' 'But she promised,' says she. You know how that voice o' hern gits away from her. Jest like Becca's for all the world! 'Oh, well,' says I, 'mebbe she promised to git red on him.' 'Solon says it's 'most criminal,' says she. You must ha' heard her squeakin' higher 'n higher, when you was tiptoein' along there with the minister. 'He says he should feel jestified in goin' in an' takin' down that clock off'n your wall an' carryin' on't home.' 'That the trouble betwixt him an' Becca?' says I. 'That why she's left him an' gone home to you?' Mis' Waterman never could hold her tongue. You know that as well as I do. She put her mouth up to my ear, and says she, 'Well, I don't mind tellin' ye that begun it. Becca got tired to death hearin' him go on about it, an' she told him so, an' then he fired up an' they had a great to-do, an' fit an' parted, an' Becca run off home. Put two o' that kind together an' it's fire an' tow.' 'Well,' says I, 'it's a terrible small thing to part husband an' wife; a kitchen clock 'most a hundred years old.'" Ann cast an indifferent eye at the banjo-shaped clock on the opposite wall. Its door had swung open, and the pendulum swayed in drowsy time.

Linda leaped from her chair, and with one swooping movement gained her sister's side.

"There's somebody in the sullar-way!" said she, below her breath. "Suthin' fell."

Something was falling then, bump upon bump, down the cellar stairs.

Ann shook off her sister's hand and smiled at her. "Law!" said she, "that's on'y the cat. You se' down. I went on talkin' to Mis' Waterman, but I kep' my own counsel. Law! thinks I, if Solon was mad the day he an' Becca fit, I guess ye wouldn't ha' known him to-day. For ye see I crossed the lot this arternoon, where he was hoein', and I stopped an' kinder led up to the clock. I touched him off like gunpowder. My soul! but I did put him through! Didn't say much of anything neither. A little here an' a little there! 'A word in season,' says the minister to-night. 'Well, Solon,' says I, when I walked away, 'look out ye don't bust a blood-vessel.'"

Linda crept nearer and put her mouth to her sister's ear. "Ann," she said, in

the smallest whisper, "there's a man in the sullar-way. I hear him breathe."

"Well! well! you le' me git over there. I'll rout him out!"

"No! no! he'll fall foul of us!"

"Why don't ye bolt the door then? If you're afraid to git him out, lock him in." At least Ann was alive to the situation. There was no hidden man. In all these years of expectation they had never been molested, though Linda was perpetually afraid. If she was not afraid of one thing she was of another. Moreover, when her fright proved groundless, she fell into such relief that it almost seemed a blessing to have had the panic. Ann so liked a little drama that now she had an unfeigned joy in watching Linda stealing across the floor. She called to her between gusts of laughter:

"Law, you poor soul! if it's goin' to be any comfort to ye, you le' me." She strode across the room to the cellar door and shot the bolt. Then, at once, she recoiled, as if the mate of Linda's timorous soul had crept into her own flesh. From the other side of the door a man's voice issued:

"Here! you le' me out! you've fastened me down sullar!"

The crisis had arrived. Somebody had got into the house at last, and Linda, after one clutch at her heart, felt a strong reaction. It had come. It was no worse than she expected. It was even better. She had a sudden, unreasoned certainty that it was over now, and need never happen again. But Ann stood silent for an instant only, and then her voice rang out:

"That you, Solon Green?"

"Who'd ye think it was?" returned the voice. "You le' me up!"

"My soul!" breathed Linda, and put out a hand to draw the bolt; but Ann withstood her. Ann's eyes were gleaming. She saw her chance and loved it.

"Well, Solon Green," said she, "what you on our sullar stairs for? Speak up now! Account for yourself!"

Solon was silent, and she called again:

"Come! come! you answer up, or I'll have in the neighbors, an' prove ye've been breakin' an' enterin'. What ye down there for?"

"I heard ye comin'," remarked Solon in a muffled tone. "I stepped in."

"You heard us comin'? Well, what were you up to when ye heard us comin'?"

"Oh, Ann," put in Linda, pleadingly, "don't ye keep on maddin' him. You jest let him up, or we sha'n't get to bed this night."

But Ann had turned a swift look at the wall behind her. "My land alive!" she cried, "you've been takin' down that clock. There's one screw half out now. Solon Green, how do you dast to do such a thing? You a professin' Christian and runnin' for selec'man!"

"It's my clock," shouted Solon. "I told ye so this artemnoon. I give ye warnin'!"

Ann drew the large rocking-chair in front of the door and sat down in it. She began swaying happily backward and forward, and as she rocked, she sang. Her voice rose piercingly upon "Invocation." It seemed a song of triumph.

"Le' me up," roared Solon from behind the door, and Linda kept on with her pattering staccato:

"Ann, you let him out. Like's not he'll do us mischief. Fust thing you know he'll burn the barn."

"He won't burn the barn while he's down sullar," said Ann, at the end of a measure.

"Oh, Ann, you ain't going to keep him down there as long as he lives, be ye?"

"I don't know as I be, an' I don't know *but* I be!" replied Ann, with a gigantic calm, and returned to her singing. But at that moment Solon's voice was far sweeter to her than her own, and presently she was listening with a model courtesy while he alternately raged and pleaded.

"Now, Solon," said she, finally, "I'll tell ye what I'll do. You make a bargain with me, and I'll let ye up. You give me your word you won't meddle nor make with that clock! Will ye?"

"No, I won't! I'll bust the door in fust."

"So do," returned Ann, suavely, "an' I'll have ye arrested before the break o' day."

Linda moaned a little, and began walking the floor. The latch of the outer door was rattling. It lifted, and a woman stepped swiftly in. It was Becca, Solon's wife.

Becca was a little woman, with a thin, freckled face, and sandy hair twisted into a knot. Her light blue eyes were sharp as needles, and a red rim about them told

the tale of recent tears. She was trembling, and when she began at once to speak, her high voice also quivered to the point of breaking.

"I know all about it," she announced. "Mother came home from prayer-meetin' an' she let it out."

"Do tell," inquired Ann, with a specious courtesy. "What she say? I should admire to know."

"It's about that clock," said Becca, accumulating fury as she spoke. "That clock was Solon's, if ever anything was. An' it's a sin an' shame for Aunt Mary to go an' leave it to Lindy. Solon's got the rights on't."

"Law me!" said Ann, with a rejoicing eye on the cellar door, "seems to me you're terrible fond o' Solon all to once. I thought you'd left him."

"It's nothing to nobody whether I've left him or not. That's between him an' me. Solon Green's as good a man as ever drawed the breath o' life."

"Mebbe he is," agreed Ann, craftily. "You can't say much for his temper, though, now, Becca. You know that."

"His temper's his own," said Becca, justly.

"Ann, Ann!" breathed Linda, "there's somebody knockin' at the door. Oh, Ann, we can't have nobody else in here this night!"

"Open the door," said Ann, expansively. "The more the merrier!"

Linda, with a little complaining note under her breath, drew the door timorously open, and stood behind it. She was prepared for anything. There was a halting step on the sill, and a man came looming in, looking about him in a futile fashion with mild blue eyes.

"Law me! If it ain't the minister!" cried Ann.

Mr. Grigsby was a bulky person, a little stooping, with a plain and thoughtful face. In winter he wore a shawl, and even on a summer night like this, a little muffler. He had a delicate throat. Linda adored him tremulously, as her spiritual head; but to-night she stood before him in a quivering resistance, as if to keep him out.

"I carried away your hymn-book," he said to her. "I thought you might be wondering."

"Sit down, Mr. Grigsby," said Ann,

with great cheerfulness, holding her place by the cellar door. "We're all down in the mouth here, three women folks together. 'Law,' says I to myself—'twa'n't half an hour ago—I wish't some men folks'd drop in.'"

"Oh, Ann!" said Linda.

But the minister had no ears for them. He was holding Becca's hand, and Becca was struggling between her official reverence and her wifely zeal. Mr. Grigsby was speaking with a veiled reproach.

"Sister Green, you were not at our gathering to-night!"

Becca drew away her hand. "No, Mr. Grigsby," said she, "I wa'n't."

"Your husband was not there either."

"He's busy," said Becca, unblushingly.

"Yes," corroborated Ann; "I'll answer for Solon. He ain't had sca'cely a minute to himself the whole evenin' long."

The minister shifted his bulk from one uneasy foot to the other. He felt the trammels of his office.

"I am told," said he, "that there is some slight trouble between you and your husband. I trust the rumor—"

Becca grew taller. She seemed to rise before him like a flame of fire. Her cheeks were hot, and her eyes shot forth little darts of defiance. Her voice shrilled like an insect on a summer noon.

"I dunno what's got into this place, that anybody can't make a week's visit in peace. Thinks I, I'll go an' stay a spell at my old home, an' nothin' 'll do but I've gone for good. I ain't livin' with my husband, says you. Well, what if I ain't? Is that anything ag'in't him? or me either, for that matter? Solon Green's as good a man as ever walked the earth, an' if a woman can't git along with him she deserves to be switched." She stopped tremulously upon the word, and the minister cleared his throat.

"I am glad," said he, "sincerely glad."

"Lindy," commanded Ann, alight with glee, "you take the minister into the fore-room an' show him Aunt Mary's picture. We've had it enlarged from that old ambrotype. Becca, you go too."

There was a thud in the cellar-way. Solon had hit his head against a shelf.

"What's that?" asked Becca.

"Oh, Ann," cried Linda. "My suz!"

"It's only the cat," said Ann, with the large carelessness of one who dominates

the situation. "We've got a terrible queer kind of a cat. 'Most like a human bein'! You couldn't tell 'em apart. Come, come, Lindy! You take this lamp and show the folks into t'other room. I'll light up here."

Linda threw open the entry door with a trembling haste. She seemed to be wafting the others before her, and Ann, lighting the lamp at the mantel, chuckled richly. When the minister's halting step had crossed the sill, she shut the door behind him and flew back to Solon. She put her lips to the crack between them.

"Solon," said she in a whisper, "ever hear the beat o' that?" There was no answer, but she almost thought she heard low laughter from the other side. "Solon, you listen! I'm goin' to read ye a sermon. You dunno women folks, an' I do. Ain't Becca gi'n you a character? Ain't she took all the blame on her own shoulders? Now you hear to me. When you make up with her, don't ye never tell ye heard her say that, till your dyin' day. You hear to me!" Solon did not speak. "Solon," said Ann, "I hear 'em movin' round in there. They're comin'. An' I'm goin' to let ye out right in their face an' eyes."

Solon kicked the stairs, and Ann shook with silent laughter. So had he raged in their school-days. So had she baited him then.

"I give ye one more chance," said she, "jest one. You swear you'll never bother Lindy about that clock?"

"I won't swear to nothin'!"

"They're comin'. I'm going to do it, Solon. You know I will. Do you give up all claim to that 'ere clock?"

"No!"

Ann raised her voice.

"Lindy, you come right back here and bring Mr. Grigsby! Solon, you promise?"

"No!"

"Lindy, come now! Bring the minister. I got suthin' to show him. Solon, will ye?"

There was a fateful pause. The minister's step was on the entry floor. Solon heard it.

"Yes!" he bellowed. "Open the door!"

"Ye give up all right and title to it?"

"Yes!"

"Ye promise not to thorn Lindy about it?"

"Yes, yes." He could not answer fast enough.

Ann shot the bolt. He stumbled into the kitchen, and Becca met him face to face. As for Ann, there was no time to close the door, and she leaned forward into the cellar-way and called speciously, "Kitty! kitty! kitty!"

"For mercy sake, Solon Green!" said Becca, fractiously; "what's the matter o' you?" Solon was rumped like a bird of prey. His red hair stood erect; even his hairy hands seemed bristling.

"Anything happened?" asked the minister, concernedly.

But Solon addressed his wife.

"Well, Becca," said he, "you ready to come home?"

The tone was gruff, but Becca flushed a little, happily. It was a tongue she knew.

"I guess so," said she, indifferently, yet with an involuntary triumph in her look at Ann. Ann laughed light-heartedly.

"Got pretty tired o' bachin' on't, Solon, didn't ye?" said she. "Law! I never'd be married if I had to be so tied to anybody's apron-strings I couldn't let 'em stay a day or two with their own mother."

Solon and his wife were walking toward the door, with an odd look of kinship and defiance of all the world beside. At the sill, Ann called to them:

"Here! here! hold on a minute! Solon, you jest as soon tighten up the screw in that old clock? It's come part way out. There's a screw-driver in your coat pocket. I see the end on't."

Solon regarded her for a perceptible second with a look of unwilling admiration. Then he walked slowly back across the floor, lifted his hand to the clock, tightened the screw, and shut the little glass door. A slow smile widened his mouth.

"Ann," said he, regardless of the minister, "if you ain't the Old One himself, you're pretty nigh kin to him."

"Much obliged, cousin Solon," returned Ann, with delicate meaning; "good-night!"

